

Northbrook Symphony weaves enchantment **by Dorothy Andries** **Pioneer Press, November 4, 2008**

We can't exactly call Larry Rapchak, music director of the Northbrook Symphony, a wizard, but there was a magic to the orchestra's "Fairy Tales & Legends" concert Sunday afternoon in the Sheely Center for the Performing Arts at Glenbrook North High School in Northbrook.

Now in his seventh season with the orchestra, the intrepid conductor led his players into several enchanted worlds -- of childhood, of misty, muted memories, and of a grand Russian fairy tale.

The last was "The Firebird" by Igor Stravinsky, a searing splendid ballet score, premiered in the same year as the composer's riot-inciting "The Rite of Spring," but far more rhapsodic and accessible. It tells the story of a prince, who captures the beloved firebird, but after she pleads for release, lets her go. He then falls in love with a princess who is in thrall to a wicked king. Fearlessly the prince wanders into the king's forest domain and is nearly turned to stone. The firebird, however, remembering his kindness, destroys the evil king, and the prince, his love and all the kingdom are set free.

The symphony played a suite of dances from the ballet, which hit all the main themes and was a showcase for the orchestral sections.

The score is replete with woodwinds, which easily impart the sense of being in another world. The composer then layers the muted brass with strings, producing an effervescent sound. But just as we are basking in the shimmering violins, the brass suddenly enters, attacking the harmonies like guerilla warriors.

Under Rapchak's baton (and certainly after many hours of rehearsal) the orchestra played with strength and mastery, bringing out all the dynamism of this mystical tale.

To add to the drama, students in the fine arts program of Glenbrook North were commissioned to paint art works telling a portion of the tale. As the music played, a piece of art pertinent to the musical sections was projected on a screen above and at the rear of the orchestra.

Some were simple, some were stunning, but they all enhanced the musical experience. After the performance, the students came on stage for well-deserved applause.

The program also included three selections from "The Wand of Youth" by Edward Elgar and Irish Rhapsody No. 4 by Charles Villiers Stanford, two works rarely played, but certainly worthy of performance.

We know Edward Elgar for his "Pomp and Circumstance" and the popular "Enigma Variations," but Rapchak uncovered a lovely piece of music in this childhood effort, penned by the composer when he was about 11 years old. He orchestrated the simple melodies later in his career and the results were more than satisfactory.

The selections were "The Little Bells," a whirling work which had the symphony's three percussionists dashing from one instrument to another,, "Fountain Dance," which was fresh and full of charm, and "Wild Bears." which, as Rapchak observed, sounded like a Russian folk dance. (Why do children love bears so?)

Stanford's Irish Rhapsody was colorful music, meant to evoke the Emerald Isle with its blue lakes and green valleys, and -- excuse me, but I heard them -- its abundant rainbows.

The music was brushed with the rhythms and intervals familiar to all who grew up with the melodies of Ireland in their homes -- or anyone who grew up in Chicago!

Of course there was a harp, its glorious glissandos cascading over the patina of the violins. Trumpets heralded the sound of battle, but there was plenty of misty wistfulness, too -- something that Irish music had in abundance.

The orchestra is playing very well these days and Rapchak is stretching its repertoire with unusual pieces -- a benefit to players and audiences alike.

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